



U.S. DEPARTMENT of STATE

Latvia

International Religious Freedom Report 2005

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The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion; however, bureaucratic problems persisted for some minority religions.

The generally amicable relations among religions in society contributed to religious freedom; however, lingering suspicions remained toward newer, nontraditional faiths.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of approximately 25,000 square miles, and its population is estimated at 2.4 million. The three largest faiths are Lutheranism, Catholicism, and Orthodox Christianity. Denominational membership statistics are self-reported estimates and are not completely reliable. Sizeable religious minorities include Baptists, Pentecostals, and various evangelical Protestant groups. The once large Jewish community was virtually destroyed in the Holocaust during the 1941-44 German occupation and now totals only an estimated 6,000 persons.

As of April 2005, the Justice Ministry had registered 1174 congregations. This total included: Lutheran (304), Roman Catholic (250), Orthodox (118), Baptist (93), Old Believer Orthodox (67), Seventh-day Adventist (50), Jehovah's Witnesses (13), Methodist (13), Jewish (13), Buddhist (4), Muslim (13), Hare Krishna (11), Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (4), and more than 100 other congregations.

Interest in religion has increased markedly since independence. However, a large percentage of these adherents do not regularly practice their faith. In 2004, churches provided the following estimates of membership to the Justice Ministry: Lutherans (539,600), Roman Catholics (428,067), Orthodox (350,000), Baptists (7,123), Old Believer Orthodox (70,635), Seventh-day Adventists (3,950), Jehovah's Witnesses (155), Methodists (1,010), Jews (667), Buddhists (108), Muslims (355), Hare Krishnas (126), and Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) (776). Although no reliable statistics exist, it is widely acknowledged that a significant portion of the population is atheist. Orthodox Christians, many of whom are Russian-speaking, non-citizen, permanent residents, are concentrated in the major cities, while many Catholics live in the east.

Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, bureaucratic problems persist for some minority religions. There is no state religion; however, the Government distinguishes between "traditional" (Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believers, Baptists, and Jewish) and "new" religions. In practice, this has not resulted in government discrimination against any particular religion.

Jews are considered an ethnic group and listed as such in passports rather than Latvian or Russian. Under the country's system, citizens' passports indicate the ethnicity of the bearer only when requested by the bearer. Ethnicity is not listed on the personal information page of the passport, but is instead stamped onto a blank visa page.

December 25 is celebrated as Christmas and is a recognized national holiday. Good Friday and Easter Monday are also national

holidays. The Orthodox Church has been seeking recognition of Orthodox Christmas for several years, but the Government had not adopted this proposal by the end of this reporting period.

The Latvian Lutheran Church established its own clergy education center, the Luther Academy in Riga, in 1998. The Roman Catholic Church also has its own seminary. The University of Latvia's theological faculty is nondenominational.

There are three councils that comment on religious issues for the Government. The New Religions Consultative Council consists of doctors, academics, and an independent human rights ombudsman. It meets on an "ad hoc" basis and offers opinions on specific issues, but it does not have decision-making authority. It has not published any information or warnings concerning cults. The Traditional Religion Council aims at facilitating greater ecumenical communication, discussing matters of common concern and improving dialogue between the traditional faiths and the Government. In the past, the council has convened monthly, but it has now been replaced by a new organization called the Ecclesiastical Council. This council was organized by the previous Prime Minister in 2002 and is chaired by either the sitting Prime Minister or the Deputy Prime Minister. It includes representatives from the major churches: Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Orthodox, Jewish, Adventist, Methodist, and Old Believers. However, the Ecclesiastical Council did not meet in plenary session during the reporting period and currently conducts business by correspondence.

Although the Government does not require the registration of religious groups, the 1995 Law on Religious Organizations accords religious organizations certain rights and privileges when they register, such as status as a separate legal entity for owning property or other financial transactions, as well as tax benefits for donors. Registration also eases the rules for public gatherings.

According to the Law on Religious Organizations, any 20 citizens or persons over the age of 18 who have been registered in the Population Register may apply to register a church. Asylum seekers, foreign staff of diplomatic missions, and those in the country temporarily in a special status may not register a religious organization. Congregations that do not belong to a registered church association must reregister each year for 10 years. Ten or more congregations of the same denomination and with permanent registration status may form a religious association. Only churches with religious association status may establish theological schools or monasteries. The decision to register a church is made by the Minister of Justice. According to Ministry of Justice officials, most registration applications are approved eventually once proper documents are submitted. In the past year, the Ministry of Justice has proposed to abolish the religious association membership requirement and reduce the new congregation registration requirement to 3 years. By the end of the period covered by this report, the Parliament had not acted on this recommendation.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

The Law on Religious Organizations does not permit simultaneous registration of more than one religious association (church) in a single confession, and therefore, the Government does not register any splinter groups. This has resulted in the denial of registration applications of several groups, including an independent Jewish congregation, the Latvian Free Orthodox Church, and a separate Old Believers group.

In 2005, the Religious Affairs Administration again proposed amendments to the Law on Religious Organizations that would abolish restrictions on single association registration. However, neither the Latvian Ecclesiastical Council nor the Government has acted on this recommendation.

Visa regulations effective since 1999 require foreign religious workers to present either an ordination certificate or evidence of religious education that corresponds to a local bachelor's degree in theology. The visa application process, requiring letters of invitation and proof of seminary training, remains cumbersome, although the Government generally was cooperative in helping resolve difficult visa cases in favor of missionary workers.

Foreign evangelists and missionaries are permitted to hold meetings and to proselytize, but the law stipulates that only domestic religious organizations may invite them to conduct such activities. Foreign religious denominations criticized this provision.

The Law on Religious Organizations stipulates that only representatives of the traditional Christian churches (i.e., Evangelical Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Old Believer, and Baptist Churches) may teach religion to public school students who volunteer to take the classes. The Government provides funds for this education. Students at state-supported national minority schools also may receive education on the religion "characteristic of the national minority" on a voluntary basis. Other denominations and religions that do not have their own state-supported minority schools, such as the Jewish community, may provide religious education only in private schools.

Property restitution has been substantially completed, although most religious groups, including the Lutheran, Orthodox, and Jewish communities, continued to wait for the return of some properties. The status of these remaining properties is unclear and is the subject of complicated legal and bureaucratic processes concerning ambiguous ownership, competing claims, and the destruction of the Jewish communities to which properties belonged before World War II. The Office of the Prime Minister has established a working group to address the restitution-related concerns of Latvia's religious communities. The Jewish community has expressed concern about the terms under which some properties have been restored.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

Forced Religious Conversion

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

Abuses by Terrorist Organizations

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by this report.

Section III. Societal Attitudes

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. Ecumenism still is a new concept in the country, and traditional religions have adopted a distinctly reserved attitude toward the concept. Although government officials encourage a broader understanding and acceptance of newer religions, many citizens continue to doubt the validity of newer, nontraditional faiths.

The Latvian Historical Commission, under the sponsorship of President Vaira Vike-Freiberga, has continued to promote Holocaust awareness throughout society. A monument to Janis Lipke, who saved 40 Jews from the Riga ghetto, is planned for completion in 2006.

In 2003, vandals overturned tombstones and sprayed anti-Semitic graffiti on the walls of Riga's New Jewish Cemetery. National leaders condemned the act and city authorities quickly repaired the damage. Similar desecrations, though on a much smaller scale, occurred in both 2004 and 2005, with similar reactions from leading local citizens. In the spring of 2005, the Orthodox rabbi of Riga was accosted, threatened, and subjected to violently anti-Semitic epithets in Old Town Riga. Many government leaders--the President in particular--have reacted to a perceived increase in public anti-Semitism by speaking out against all forms of xenophobia and appearing prominently at Holocaust-related commemoration events. The Government actively discourages anti-Semitism; nonetheless, cultural anti-Semitism--though hard to quantify--persists. Books and other publications appearing in the country that address the World War II period generally dwell on the effects that the Russian and Nazi occupations had on the state and on ethnic Latvians, often minimizing comment on the Holocaust or the country's role in it.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

During the period covered by the report, the U.S. Embassy worked to support the principle of religious freedom by engaging in regular exchanges with appropriate government bodies, including the Director of the Office of Religious Affairs, human rights nongovernmental organizations, and representatives of various religious confessions, including missionaries. The Embassy' also held regular discussions with local immigration authorities and section meetings with the Department of Religious Affairs.

The Embassy actively supports the Latvian Historical Commission. It has funded the travel of scholars to the United States for education on ethnic and religious tolerance and of U.S. experts to the country for Historical Commission activities. In addition, the Embassy worked with the Government to develop a Holocaust education curriculum for all students in grades 9-12. The Embassy funds the training of teachers in curriculum development, the production and publication of a Holocaust education curriculum, and the preparation of teachers to teach Holocaust history and awareness. The completed Holocaust curriculum was published in late spring 2005 and, following teacher training throughout the summer, is scheduled to be implemented in the 2005-06 school year.

Embassy officials maintain an open and productive dialogue with the Government's Director of the Office of Religious Affairs. Embassy officials also meet regularly with visiting missionary groups as well as representatives of different religious confessions, both local and foreign. Officials often discuss problems certain minority religious groups had experienced at the Citizenship and Migration Department when seeking visas and residency permits.

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